

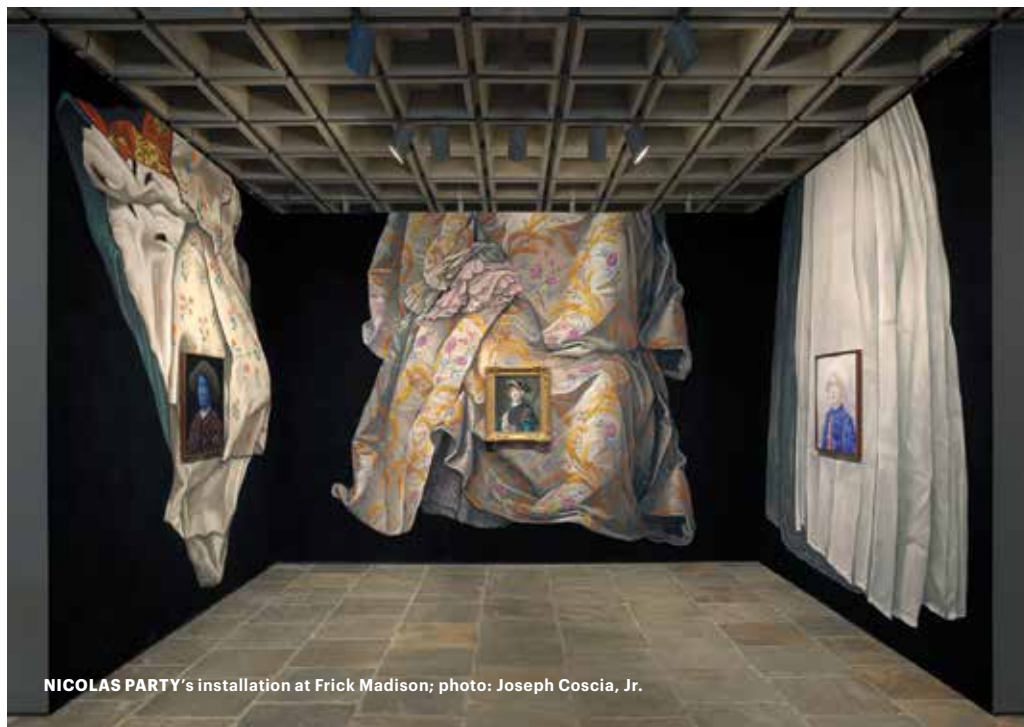
# A MEETING OF OLD & NEW MASTERS

**T**he Swiss-born artist Nicolas Party (b. 1980) recounts a dinner, of sorts, he attended at Frick Madison, the Frick Collection's temporary home in the former Whitney Museum building in Manhattan. This spring, upon finishing his commission to create an *in situ* pastel work that references the museum's two prized pastel drawings by Rosalba Carriera (1673–1757), Party felt that the gallery where his art appears is like a big, airy dining room.

"Everyone in the room," he says, referencing the nearby Bronzino portrait of Lodovico Capponi, Titian's portraits of a man in a red cap and of Pietro Aretino, Bellini's depiction of St. Francis off in a nearby alcove, and the other mostly Italian masterpieces, "is at a dinner party, talking and eating together." For the remaining months that Party's arresting installation is on view (until March 3, 2024), with its depiction of fabrics flowing around portraits that have the effect of *trompe l'oeil*, he thinks of all the works in the room as guests at that communal gathering.

"Ever since the Frick relocated to this building," says Party, "its characters are at a temporary dinner, having a conversation they wouldn't have had otherwise. Because my installation will literally be dismantled in March, my characters will die, perhaps from having had too much food." But Party acknowledges that it has so far been a tasty meal.

Well before relocating from its mansion on Fifth Avenue (under renovation until next year) to the brutalist structure on Madison Avenue



NICOLAS PARTY's installation at Frick Madison; photo: Joseph Coscia, Jr.

completed by architect Marcel Breuer in 1966, the Frick has been embracing contemporary artists. Among the most startling examples of this initiative was the temporary 2019 installation (at the mansion) of sculptures by the author and ceramicist Edmund de Waal. His decidedly minimalist and diminutive vessels made of porcelain, steel, gold, marble, and glass were positioned adjacent to some of the museum's masterpieces.



(LEFT) NICOLAS PARTY (b. 1980), *Drapery* (a detail from Maurice Quentin de La Tour's full-length portrait of the Marquise de Pompadour at the Musée du Louvre) surrounding ROSALBA CARRIERA (1673–1757), *Portrait of a Man in Pilgrim's Costume*, c. 1730, pastel on paper glued to canvas, 23 1/4 x 18 15/16 in., Frick Collection, gift of Alexis Gregory; photo: Joseph Coscia Jr.



(ABOVE) NICOLAS PARTY (b. 1980), *Portrait*, 2023, soft pastel on pastel card, 30 1/16 x 23 1/4 in., photo: Joseph Coscia Jr

It proved a jarring juxtaposition for some visitors. So rudimentary in form are de Waal's works, so unyielding in what they are meant to convey, that some people mistook them for temperature-control devices or high-tech security systems. His monochromatic vessels were scattered throughout the museum, but it was a plexiglass vitrine (an object never seen before at the museum) filled with them and placed on a marble-topped table before Ingres's famous portrait of the Comtesse d'Haussonville that proved most controversial. After all, she is often regarded as the unofficial face of the museum, literally the cover girl on the Frick's *Handbook of Paintings*.

"By placing the works where we did, Edmund visually broke the line of view to the Comtesse, and some visitors felt it was almost a sacrilegious act," recalls Frick curator Aimee Ng. "But those objections told us that people were looking at — and cared so much about — our works that they had come to think of them almost as their own, that these are works that 'belong' to them. They feel a connection to the Frick and wanted to keep things as they are, without change."

Upon decamping to the modernist Breuer building, the very antithesis of the Gilded Age mansion with its chiming clocks and French doors leading to gardens, the Frick's curators and its director, Ian Wardropper, saw their change of venue as an impetus to expand the museum's agenda. The new location allowed for this aesthetic shift, and not just temporarily. In so doing, the team thought they would be able to court a new audience more likely to visit the revamped mansion when it reopens late in 2024.

Ng acknowledges that the very architecture of the mansion is both attractive and off-putting to potential museumgoers. Those unfamiliar with the Frick might regard its sprawling 1914 limestone edifice, ringed by an imposing wrought-iron fence, as a private residence (which it was) and thus as a place off-limits to mere passersby. "The mansion presents an initial physical barrier," says Ng, "but once a visitor makes it up the steps and through the threshold of the Frick house, they experience something very intimate and welcoming."

By contrast, the Breuer building was designed as a museum, so it draws people in because they recognize it immediately as a public facility. "I distinctly believe that how a museum looks from the outside dictates whether people will go inside," Ng notes. "Frick Madison is an open, modern space without the physical barrier of what might appear to be a private residence." Some, however, regard the Breuer, conspicuous for its concrete drawbridge spanning a waterless moat, as a fortress more forbidding than the mansion a few blocks away.

Given the flexibility of the Breuer's columnless interiors, minimally illuminated by a few trapezoidal windows, the Frick team recognized a further opportunity to introduce contemporary art and artists. "As curators charged with the care and interpretation of our great collection, we wanted to explore and challenge our audiences — living artists among them — to reflect on how Old Masters retain their relevance today," comments Xavier F. Salomon, the Frick's deputy director and chief curator.





In 2019, *that pause of space* — a plexiglass vitrine containing sculptures made of porcelain, gold, alabaster, and aluminum by **EDMUND DE WAAL** (b. 1964) — was installed in front of Ingres's portrait of the Comtesse d'Haussonville; photo: Christopher Burke



**DORON LANGBERG** (b. 1985) with his painting *Lover* (2021)

At the mansion, that exploration had already begun with — among other projects — de Waal's ceramics and porcelains by sculptor Arlene Shechet, but the Breuer was clearly even more appropriate for the new and current.

#### THE NEW MASTERS ARRIVE

Among the most daring exhibitions to feature local (New York-based) artists was *Living Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters*, a rotating show featuring four painters that launched in September 2021. When some of the Frick's best-known works went out on loan — including one of three Vermeers, Rembrandt's *The Polish Rider*, and two Holbeins — the curators wanted to fill those empty spaces on the walls. "Like all of the projects we do here, this one emerged from a need," Ng says. "We don't have a deep storage of pieces that aren't on view, so we saw this as an opportunity for what we could do instead." Essentially, the newly commissioned works would respond not to what was out on loan, but, rather, to what remained nearby, thus fostering a dialogue.

The Israeli-born portraitist Doron Langberg (b. 1985) was commissioned to respond to Holbein's portrait of Thomas Cromwell, which until that point had been paired on a wall with Holbein's portrait of Thomas More (then out on loan). During the 11 years Langberg has made New York his home, he has visited the Frick frequently, at both of its locations. Salomon and Langberg were already friends, but it was on a visit the curator made to Langberg's Queens studio that the commissioning idea arose. "My jaw dropped when I got the



**SALMAN TOOR** (b. 1983) examines Johannes Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid* (right). His own painting, *Museum Boys* (2021), hangs at left.



Artist **JENNA GRIBBON** (b. 1978) with curators Xavier F. Salomon and Aimee Ng. At left hangs Gribbon's painting *What Am I Doing Here? I Should Ask You the Same* (2022), and at right Hans Holbein the Younger's portrait of Thomas Cromwell.

call," he says. "To show one of my paintings at the Frick was a dream come true that I didn't even know I *had* dreamed, or that was even possible to dream. I would never have thought of the Frick as presenting an opportunity for contemporary artists."

Langberg describes his paintings, mostly portraits, as "usually quite loose" in composition, but he spent more time composing what he calls *Lover* than most of his works. "The resulting work has more of a clarity to it and is more resolved than how I usually work," he explains. "I studied the Holbein and his relationship to rendering a figure and how tiny, tiny details can relate to the whole composition." Langberg's remarks harken to the Frick's 2021 publication *The Sleeve Should Be Illegal*, whose title and cover image reference the elaborate folds in Sir Thomas More's clothing.

"It was such a surreal moment," Langberg recalls of the day he helped install his painting, which shows a seated, shirtless man absorbed in reading. "There was a Holbein resting on a dolly — granted, a very secure dolly — but to see people handling masterpieces like that was mind-blowing on its own. Suddenly, there was my work hanging beside his. That experience was and still is the highlight of my career." (*Lover* has since been acquired by the High Museum of Art in Atlanta.)

Other artists participating in *Living Histories* include Salman Toor (b. 1983), who was commissioned to respond to the two remaining Vermeers; Jenna Gribbon (b. 1978) and Toyin Ojih Odutola (b. 1985) were tasked with responding to works by Holbein and Rembrandt respectively.

While each artist was, essentially, given carte blanche to create what they wished, Langberg was happy to have welcomed Ng to his studio during the creative process. "To talk with Aimee and Xavier is to engage with people who have such a deep knowledge of painting," says Langberg. "It's rare to find people like that. And while the Breuer building has allowed the Frick's masterworks to be seen in a new light, I'm eager to see them back where they once lived."

While Ng and Salomon are used to seeking and discovering nuances in the collection's artworks, they have discovered an aspect of the Frick audience that was largely unfamiliar to them. "We've come to understand that there are so many artists who come here to look at Old Masters, but who were never on our radar for showing their works," Ng explains. Indeed, the four painters chosen for *Living Histories* are exactly in that category: "The artists we've featured are embedded in Old Master traditions, even though it's not immediately obvious in their work."

#### THE LAST PICTURE SHOW

For its final embrace of contemporary artists at Frick Madison before that venue closes in March 2024, the museum has organized an exhibition of portraits by Barkley L. Hendricks (1945–2017). "I wanted to mount as big a show as possible in this particular space as a way to honor some of the new stories, the new audiences that have come to Frick Madison but who weren't so obvious to us," says Ng.

Among them was Hendricks, who, Ng discovered during her research, visited regularly beginning in the 1960s when he was emerging as a cultural force. From his wife, Susan Hendricks, Ng learned that the Frick was his favorite American museum and a continuous source of inspiration for his then-unconventional portraits of Black people. "She was in tears as she spoke about this aspect of her husband and how much this show would have meant to him now," Ng recalls.



(LEFT) BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS (1945–2017), *Lawdy Mama*, 1969, oil and gold leaf on canvas, 53 3/4 x 36 1/4 in., Studio Museum of Harlem, New York, gift of Stuart Liebman in memory of Joseph B. Liebman ■ (RIGHT) BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS (1945–2017), *Self-Portrait with Black Hat*, 1980–2013, digital C-print, 27 3/4 x 18 3/4 in., Jack Shainman Gallery, New York © Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks and Jack Shainman Gallery

In concert with Susan Hendricks and guest curator Antwaun Sargent, Ng has chosen 14 works ranging in date from 1969 to 1983. They will hang on the fourth floor, where “the ceilings are of double height and there’s a little more breathing space,” Ng notes — “an appropriate venue for the Hendricks works. What he was painting was a great pioneering moment in contemporary art. I believe that, had Henry Clay Frick been alive at the time, works by Hendricks, as well as those by the *Living Histories* artists, would have been what he’d buy for his collection.”

Today, there is a certain poignancy about the Nicolas Party commission that covers three walls, for it will eventually be only a memory. Its pastel medium is inherently fragile and makes it unmovable, a characteristic Party embraces. Although the mural is applied to plywood panels affixed to walls, Party explains, “When it’s time for the Frick to move back to the mansion, the plywood will be removed and, well, put in the trash.” At the public unveiling this June, he emphasized the medium’s fragility by licking his finger and pressing it ever so gently to a wall, producing a glimmering hint of pastel dust on his fingertip. “This is how fragile the work is,” he told the somewhat stunned crowd. “Only I’m allowed to do what I just did since I’m the artist,” he added with humor, nodding to one of the security guards, who have remained extra diligent in ensuring no one rubs against the work or even sneezes too close.

“The Breuer building was built for contemporary art,” Party emphasizes, “and not for the display of Old Masters. But in its flexibility, the space allows for a conversation with the past. Some things progress. Art doesn’t progress. The art being made now is not better than it was in the past. It’s just different. By letting contemporary artists show their work here, and in the mansion, too, the Frick has allowed for a conversation about the present, the past, and the future.” Indeed, the Breuer building called for such dialogue and the Frick curators answered that call. “I’m very grateful to have been part of it for these many months,” Party adds.

Fortunately, that lively metaphorical dinner party among artists of past and present has not ended, but will resume at the mansion on Fifth Avenue. ●

**Information:** [frick.org](http://frick.org). A 112-page publication devoted to *Living Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters* will be available this September via the museum and *Giles* (London).

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